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AT LIBERTY TO COURT? AUTONOMY IN THE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

A view of the self as autonomous, independent and sovereign is becoming more common, in social life and in organization theory (Harre, 1989; Foucault, 1991b; Rose, 1999). The in-depth empirical study of one work organization, presented here, illustrates the day-to-day enactment of this worldview in the workplace. Interestingly, while non-profit NGOs operating in the development sector might typically be regarded as being founded on a concern for the other, the account here illustrates that in contrast, a worldview inscribed by notions of independence and sovereignty prevailed. Autonomy is described as at once powerful, hidden and constructed; in this organization, notions of standing apart from, and remaining untainted by, particular vested interests in the development sphere contributed to the persistence of these interests. In this explication of the hegemony of autonomy in one workplace setting, contributions are made to current discussions regarding the efficacy of this discourse (Rose, 1999, Foucault, 1991b; Gergen, 1989). Drawing on these observations, the implications for Butler's vision of a future politics of identification, a future in which incoherence, unknowingness and openness to the other takes primacy, are discussed (Butler, 2004; Taylor and Hansen).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kate Kenny is a University Lecturer in Human Resources & Organisations at Cambridge's Judge Business School. Prior to her doctorate at this school, Dr Kenny was a consultant at the Irish Construction Information Technology Alliance. She has also been a professional services manager for BuildOnline UK (2000-2003), and a structural engineer in Ireland and Australia (1998-2000). She has won a number of awards, the latest being an Economic and Social Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship (2006). Her research interests include critical management studies, issues of identity, power and emotion in contemporary workplaces and ethnographic research methodologies.

AUTONOMY AT WORK

The discourse of autonomy is increasingly prevalent within contemporary work organizations (Casey, 1995; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Newton, 1999, Willmott, 1993; 1998). This has been illustrated by a number of recent studies, including Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) account of the "enterprise" discourse, which, they note, arose partly as a result of recent programmes of reform within the UK public and semi-private sectors. These reforms were designed to introduce free market principles into activities such as health and education and in doing so, the idea of the individual as free-thinking, autonomous and responsible came to dominate rhetoric and practice in many organizations (see also Thomas and Davies, 2005). Du Gay and Salaman locate the source of the enterprise culture in this ethos of the free market which, they note, has comes to define the way in which people relate to themselves. For example, people are increasingly encouraged to view their lives as "projects", the goals of which should be to "maximize the worth of their existence to themselves, through personalized acts of choice" (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 623). These acts might represent the exercise of sovereign choice over goods and services (Du Gay and

Salaman, 1992), or indeed choices involving what Grey (1994) terms ones' career "trajectory". Relating this to the commercial sector, Du Gay and Salaman (1992) show how the enterprise discourse can be seen in the ways in which customer autonomy is constructed by organizations; customers are now encouraged to feel that they are somewhat sovereign and in control of their choices. This rhetoric ignores the fact that customer preferences are, to a large extent "generated and structured by the producers themselves" (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 619). Thus, Du Gay and Salaman observe that "the language of the sovereign customer" is becoming increasingly prevalent within a wide range of workplace activities, structures and technologies (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 622).

Willmott is similarly concerned with the valourization of the notion of the individual as autonomous and free within contemporary workplaces (1993). He examines the influence of particular management theories, including Human Relations Theory, and Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*, and describes how these promote a notion of the employee as a free-thinking, self-actualizing individual. By imparting this discourse of "freedom" in tandem with the kinds of strong corporate culture initiatives that have become more prevalent of late, managers can ensure that "individual" needs for self-actualization, however constructed they might be, are congruent with the needs of the organization, such as the assumption of individual responsibility (Knights and Willmott, 1987). This results in a kind of self-disciplining, where feelings of "anxiety, shame and guilt" arise when employees feel that they are falling short of an autonomous ideal self, and helps to foster strong organizational culture, albeit in a subtle and normative way (Willmott, 1993: 523). Thus, as Willmott notes, "the 'autonomous' subjectivity of the productive individual has become a central economic resource", an interesting twist given that employee autonomy might intuitively be considered as something that hampers control strategies within organizations (1993: 522, see also Casey, 1995).

In summary, when discussing the rise of the discourse of autonomy, I refer to the idea that people are increasingly being constituted, and encouraged to constitute themselves, as "autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualising individual actors", who have responsibility and control over their environment (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 623), whether these be Willmott's (1993) employees, Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) customers, or Grey's (1994) accounting consultants.

Autonomy: An Enjoyable Feeling

Autonomy is quite an enjoyable feeling. If a particular trait is somewhat revered and celebrated by one's friends and family, then it appears important to strive for it, and pleasurable to attain it (Butler, 2004; Sampson, 1989). As Willmott notes, autonomy enables employees to feel actualized and self-determined, and to develop a strong sense of self (where the definition of "self" is a clearly modern, humanist one). Regardless of the geneaology of this sense of self, the attainment of a culturally valid way of being is a pleasurable and rewarding one, overcoming existential angst about one's place in the world (Knights and Willmott, 1987; Willmott, 1993). The symbolic rewards can be great, as Willmott (1993) notes in his examination of Peters and Waterman's theme of *Respect for the Individual*. The excellent companies which employ this principle turn average, run of the mill employees into "winners", through the rewarding of individualist, actualizing traits and practices (Willmott, 1993: 526). Storey et al. found that freelance media workers enjoyed the feeling of "mastery over their lives" provided them by the enterprise discourse, a feeling of freedom to be creative, and to work as they wished on a wide variety of projects of their choosing (Storey et al, 2005: 1050).

Moreover, maintaining a self-image in which one is in control is important both in relationships with oneself and with other people, given that the others we interact with expect this of us (Alvesson and Willmott 2004; Butler 2004). What Butler terms "normative autonomy" is "a socially conditioned way of living in the world" in Western societies (2004: 77). Thus, an attitude towards ourselves as being in control of our own circumstances is vital to our construction of self-identity in contemporary

life; “the desire to foreclose an open future can be a strong one” (Butler, 2004: 180). For these reasons, the discourse of autonomy is arguably both positive and productive in the role it plays in a person’s self-conception and survival in the social sphere (Willmott, 1998; 2005). It can be therefore be seen that while striving for these qualities is a satisfying and pleasurable thing to do, in a cultural context which valourizes them, it becomes an essential aspect of survival. Subscribing to the “norms of recognition”, where these norms advocate an enterprising self, is less of an option than a compulsion (Butler, 2004). Autonomy is, as such, necessary to survival. The “enjoyment” described above derives from this necessity; we require the notion of ourselves as autonomous, in order to live our lives. This enjoyable, necessary discourse is not a “given”, nor an essential aspect of human life, but an historically and culturally contingent phenomenon, as will be described next.

Autonomy not a Given

As implied above by Willmott (1993), the notion of a somewhat “sovereign self” has been given primacy in recent social theory (Harre, 1989; Sampson, 1989). Moving on from structuralism, in which people were assumed to be more or less determined by particular social structures, since the 1970s, a renewed emphasis on individual agency and choice has taken centre stage in understanding social life. Cohen’s investigation of the primacy of the self (1994) and Giddens’ development of the notion of agency within his structuration framework (1984, 1991) are examples of such developments. Even in poststructural studies of organizations, in which the notion of the sovereign self has traditionally been problematized as something that risks ignoring important issues of power, recent calls for an emphasis on the autonomous, agentic individual reflect these wider trends in social theory (Mumby, 2005). Such moves must be placed in their historical specificity however, something that the work of Michel Foucault is particularly useful for. Willmott (2003) relates the renewed attention to agency and individualism to the rise of liberal humanist politics, which assume that a person is endowed with an natural “pre-social autonomy”, possessing both the right and the ability to realize their own “innate sovereignty”, a process achieved through participating in free market transactions that enjoy independence from state interference (Willmott 2003: 539). Foucault’s work places this assumption of

autonomy among a matrix of forces that include a cultural primacy on scientific modes of classification, which leads to an objectivising of ourselves and others, with an inherent assumption that both are independent and separate (Foucault, 1976; 1982; 1991; 1991b). Thus, what we accept as the autonomous, coherent self that is, more or less, in control is seen to be a relatively recent phenomenon, one which is inscribed by a matrix of cultural, political, and importantly, economic factors (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Storey et al., 2005; Willmott, 1998). As Foucault points out, this fascination with the autonomous individual is "debilitating" with regards to the ways in which we perceive contemporary life (Foucault, 1982: 254). Thus, the discourse of autonomy is not only constructed but, also, dangerous (Foucault, 1991). These dangers are outlined in the following section.

Autonomy as Dangerous: What it Does

For Foucault, our current preoccupation with understanding our "selves" as individual, autonomous entities blinds us to the workings of power (1976). Specifically, we assume that power is something that emanates from the more or less free choices of particular individual actors, "power emerges as what belongs exclusively to the subject, (making the subject appear as if it belonged to no prior operation of power)" (Butler, 1998: 15). In fact, according to Foucault, what this does is to conceal an awareness that power emanates from the dispersed activity of a matrix of actors (Foucault, 1976; 1991). The illusion that power is the domain of the autonomous agentic individual simply blinds us to the operation of power/ knowledge relations in society. In fact, the very notion that the subject is the source and operator of power is itself "a working of power", one that is concealed by its apparently natural existence (Butler, 1998: 16; Foucault, 1982).

In addition to promoting a blindness to power and relatedly, to the contingency of the concept of the autonomous self, Willmott describes how the discourse of autonomy can blind workers to the power of corporate culture. The promotion of a notion of freedom and control acts to cover over the reality of capitalist relations of production, a notion for which he draws on Marx (Willmott, 2003). What the discourse of

autonomy acts to conceal is that the "freedom" it bestows "carries with it the responsibility for (employees') subsistence (and that of their dependants) as feudal ties of reciprocal obligation are broken" (Willmott 2003: 529). The problem is that an inherent contradiction persists in the rhetoric of worker autonomy: in contemporary employment landscapes, jobs are not necessarily secure, and, despite this, the discourse of autonomy places responsibility for actualizing their own lives and futures at the door of the workers themselves. This dilemma refers to what Foucault terms our inescapable "political double-bind" (Rabinow, 1991: 22), in which we are made feel "individually responsible for social processes", a feeling that "implicates us in the reproduction of relations of domination" (1991: 57).

The taken-for-granted nature of the idea of the individual as autonomous and in control imparts a kind of "moral neutrality" onto this way of knowing. To paraphrase Foucault, it is only when a given force is seen to have particular effects that we take it seriously and consider it to be "dangerous" (Foucault, 1982: 343). Autonomy, in contrast, has the flavour of a somewhat neutral way of being and this robs us of a capacity to reflect upon and potentially critique the impact that this sense can have.

In addition to blinding us to the workings of power, and robbing us of the ability to critically reflect upon its effects, the discourse of autonomy can also lead us to believe that we are independent from other people (Butler, 1998; 2004). Butler discusses this in relation to the recent debates on transsexual and transgender choices and notes the inherent contradiction when such debates are framed in the terms of liberal humanism, which implies some sort of freedom to choose, in this case, one's own gender. In fact, she notes, transgender people quickly realize that they are inescapably embedded in norms given to them by others; "'choosing' one's own body invariably means navigating among norms that are laid out in advance and prior to one's choice" (Butler, 2004: 7). It is interesting, she argues, how the pain and grief experienced in attempts to construct identities that are alterior to culturally sanctioned ones, can show how we are, in fact, "in the thrall of our relations with others", in

ways that are not always obvious to us (Butler, 2004: 19). These attachments we have to other people frequently act to disrupt the "self-conscious account of ourselves" we often hold, "in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (Butler, 2004: 19). In *Undoing Gender* (2004), she draws on recent medical diagnoses of gender identity disorder in the United States to illustrate "the concrete limits to any notion of autonomy that establishes the individual as alone, free of social conditions, without dependency on social instruments of various kinds" (2004: 77). This relates to recent calls within organization studies for a renewed emphasis on aesthetics (Taylor and Hansen 2005; Mack 2007). If aesthetic appreciation involves an awareness of "our feelings of what it is to be part of more than ourselves", then the dominance of an autonomous worldview clearly acts to obstruct this approach (Taylor and Hansen, 2005: 1215).

The negative consequences of these aspects of the discourse of autonomy: blindness to power, moral neutrality and blindness to embeddedness in other people, have been illustrated in recent studies of work organizations. Newton's (1995) analysis of the discourse of the "stress" emotion within contemporary workplaces offers a valuable exemplar. He problematizes the normalization of stress at work, noting that it contains attendant ideas about individual autonomy and responsibility. The stress discourse, Newton argues, lays the blame primarily on *the individual* for their health, well-being and performance at work, rather than focussing upon, for example, specific workplace conditions, or upon employees' positions in relation to class, race or gender. The very innocence and neutrality by which we have come to accept emotion words like stress, he implies, adds to their inherent danger when they become appropriated by and articulated to, particular powerful interests. Expanding on these powerful interests, his genealogy of stress finds the "individualistic logic of the stress discourse in-keeping with the anti-collectivist policies, such as the neo-liberalism of Reagan and Thatcher" (Newton, 1995: 67). This relates to observations by anthropologist Catherine Lutz, among others, regarding the individualizing effects of cultural practices, such as therapy, in contemporary life. Psychoanalysis, it is argued, tends to place responsibility for domination and suffering firmly at the door of the

sufferer herself, and this, Lutz argues, is somewhat unique to Western cultures (Lutz, 1988; see also Newton, 1995). In other cultural contexts, "mental illnesses" are regarded as a problem for the entire community. Lutz describes the attitude towards depression in the Pacific Island of Ifaluk, where the "blame" or cause for this illness is deemed to lie with the environment, friends and family of the sufferer (Lutz, 1988).

The above ideas on the discourse of autonomy: its genealogy, inherent pleasures and potential dangers, were helpful when it came time to make sense of the account of life at EWH generated during my nine months of participant observation there. In the following section, the ways in which this research was carried out are described, before detailing the depth and efficacy of this discourse at EWH.

OBSERVING OR BEING UNRAVELLED? "DATA COLLECTION" AT EWH

The following is an account of nine months spent in a non-profit ICT4D sector NGO, based in the United Kingdom. In May 2004, I joined a world where sandals and aid agency t-shirts were the unofficial uniform at work, where we cycled to our "office" in a tumbledown outhouse that had been donated by a sympathetic supporter, and where we lunched on organic, fair trade falafel and pickles; my fifteen or so colleagues and I crowded round a battered kitchen table, debating the dangers of Diet Coke, four wheel drive vehicles, and the spectre of donor funding running out. I tagged along when the management team attended meetings with our donor in their glass fronted offices in central London, and when they visited shanty towns in Nairobi's Kibera to pilot test our latest software development.

"Methodologically" speaking, I was a participant observer with a focus on the "less formal interactions of everyday life" (Bergstrom and Knights, 2006: 374). In addition to my field notes, data collected included documents, emails, interview transcripts, meeting minutes, photographs and excerpts from EWH's intranet. Initially focusing

on issues of identity and identification, I became interested the ways in which my colleagues and I interacted with sources of identification that appeared significant, in particular, with the development sector. The idea of autonomy appeared again and again and so I decided to study in detail the ways in which this way of knowing inscribed the "complex social practices" I was observing (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1134). Thus, this formulation of the discourse of autonomy is a "close-range" one, local to this research setting (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Webb, 2006). As a participant observer, my role at EWH was to carry out various bits of background research that the management team required for reports, including, for example, a "country profile" of Kenya. As Walsham notes, "researchers inevitably influence the interpretations of those people who are being researched", and my presence obviously affected life at the organization in many ways (1995: 77). I thus attempt to present this study as a research interaction, rather than as a somewhat neutral account of life at EWH.

The prevalence of an underlying sense of autonomy, and the fallacy of this, was clear to me even upon reflection on my own experiences as a researcher. Once installed at EWH, the process of data collection began and however tempting it might be to imply that this was something that I designed and executed according to my own premeditated plans, this would be a false account. Having read much of the literature within organization studies, sociology and anthropology on participant observation and ethnographic research, in devising my "research plans" I was under the impression that I would be able to, more or less, control my work and interaction with the organization I was studying (Watson, 1994). In actual fact, the negotiation of my engagement with the organization formed the site of an ongoing struggle (Kondo, 1990; Lutz, 1988). I was required to take on projects whose scope were undefined initially and began to panic when the work rapidly escalated in size and scope. I was expected to attend meetings in London after which I would return home in the late evening, almost too tired to write up my field notes. I certainly had not planned upon being hospitalised for three weeks in the infectious diseases unit of my local hospital upon my return from Kenya. While these experiences provided valuable

opportunities for observing daily life at EWH and the realities of development sector work, I was, by no means, in control of my own engagement with this organization.

"Again, I really have to keep remembering that this is a piece of PhD research. This means that I am entitled to my own time, to restrict my involvement with EWH to the two days per week we agreed…. EWH don't, understandably, seem to care much for my PhD…" (Field notes, 15th September 2004)

Regardless of any work plan I might have had, therefore, my experiences as a participant observer were subject to a myriad of influences beyond my control, only three of which are described here. Indeed, I felt my own autonomous and self-driven plans for an academic career, post-PhD, slowly unravelling: I became increasingly interested in the work I was doing and felt great about the friendships I was making in the organization, so much so that by September 2004 I had begun to discuss applying for a permanent job at EWH and abandoning previous plans for a future in the university. Related to this observation, Lutz (1988) critiques what she refers to as the fallacy of control that is often found in Western ethnographic accounts. In fact, she links this illusion on the part of many researchers, that they are in a position to design and manage their interactions with the research "site", to dominant Western notions of the self as autonomous.

MONEY FROM STRANGE, STRANGE SOURCES: AUTONOMY AT EWH

EWH were dependent on funding from development sector donors. This dependency was not immediately observable from what people *said,* either in day to day conversation, and especially in interviews I carried out during the research. However, an analysis of the participant observation data shows that this dependency was quite clear in what they (we) *did.* This section describes this dependency before highlighting the pervasiveness of the discourse of autonomy at EWH. It focuses on an apparent sense in EWH that members of the organization could remain autonomous in their actions and therefore would not be tainted by aspects of the development industry about which they were cynical.

The Power of Funding at EWH

Funding was an omnipresent topic of conversation at EWH. As a non-profit organization, it depended on donor money to carry out its projects, purchase supplies and pay its salaries. Funding was central to EWH; potential sources included the UK government's a/d departments, other NGOs, United Nations organizations and private sector firms who wished to invest in ICT4D as part of a corporate social responsibility campaign. This centrality was observable in its presence on the agenda at almost every team meeting held during the period of research. From the outset, the firm had anticipated the centrality of funding to the daily operations of EWH. Roger discussed this aspect during a meeting with a fellow NGO manager in which the two were sharing "war stories" about the difficulty of remaining sustainable in an uncertain funding environment:

"I think we as an organization went into it knowing that that's what we would have to be doing (raising funding on a regular basis)" (Roger, Meeting with Pride Africa, November 2004)

Over the year I spent with EWH, I noticed how the team made a number of fundamental changes to their work, structure and strategy, in direct response to what they believed various funding bodies wanted and needed. For example, on the day I joined EWH, CEO Derek mentioned that there was a lot of donor money available for projects that target Eastern Europe.

"We were thinking about doing something in Eastern Europe… there's a lot of EU money, and we could fit into that… we were thinking of the Soros Foundation… he's very interested in education in Eastern Europe." (Derek, Interview, 30th April 2004)

While this avenue of funding was not pursued, the above excerpt represents the ways in which EWH was prepared to reposition itself in order to increase the likelihood of attracting donations. Another example involved the receipt of a large donation from UKD. This money was meant for testing EWH's latest software product in a developing country of the team's choosing. Given that the organization hoped that more funding might be available from UKD in the future, the team sought their

donor's advice in the selection of the target country. A meeting took place in September 2004, at which this was discussed:

"(Our donor representative) was pretty clear about it, (he said) 'UKD are targeting the poorest of the poor. Nigeria is an important country to UKD… really poor. We are putting a lot of money into Nigeria'. He went on to mention other 'key countries for UKD', including Ghana and Kenya… Also discussed some street kids in Ethiopia project which has links to UKD." (Field notes, UKD's offices, London, 3rd September)

Kenya was eventually chosen by EWH, and a pilot study team that included myself, departed in late October 2004. Even as this trip was still in the planning stages, it had been decided to apply for further funding from the Fitzgerald Charitable trust. This source of funding, which eventually yielded a grant of in the region of £55,000, was seen as essential and so "courting" Fitzgerald took priority in EWH's activities. A lot of research was carried out, prior to writing, into the kinds of projects that this organization tended to give money to. Happily, it was discovered that Kenya was also a priority country for Fitzgerald:

"Three countries that are of specific interest to Fitzgerald are already included in our UKD project and would be ideal focus points for this (proposed) project. As mentioned, Kenya is a likely prime focus – mentioned by both UKD and the International Federation of the Red Cross as a preferred pilot project country... South Africa and Uganda are also already involved." (Document Excerpt: Final Proposal to Fitzgerald Foundation, 20th August 2004)

Again, it is clear that the content of these funding proposals tended to reflect the interests of the people supplying the money. In particular, three of EWH's most important funding applications, all made to different organizations, focused on the same "key countries": Kenya, Ghana and Uganda. A variety of reasons may be offered for this[1] but in the context of this account, the fact remains that EWH acted

[1] For example, in the years since Kenyan independence, the United Kingdom remains by far the largest foreign investor in Kenya. Over 60 British companies are represented in Kenya, with British

upon these donor preferences by choosing to spend the money on researching Kenyan communities.

It had been implicitly hoped within EWH that their largest donor UKD might continue to fund the organization's projects. By Christmas 2004, however, EWH found itself at the mercy of a reorganization within UKD itself. In short, the donor planned to change the way it gave donations, such that money would only be granted to networks of organizations collaborating on a larger project. This would, according to EWH's donor representative, reduce the administrative burden associated with the management of many smaller grants.

"They don't normally give out (money) to small projects; it's petty cash for them. It's a pity because I think a lot of useful stuff could come out of it, if they funded a lot of small interesting projects, but to administer them they would need to hire additional staff and really UKD cannot justify spending money that should be going to international aid, on extra staff for the London office." (Roger, Field notes, 8th November 2004)

EWH staff members thus realized that they would need to look elsewhere for funding. Two options were available and both involved a further repositioning of the firm. The first option involved applying to a UK government source of funding, which focused on promoting innovation in the UK:

"To be successful we will need to persuade the (UK government) that the research we are proposing is novel, high quality research, which addresses technical challenges and has impact on business." (Mark, Email, 5th February 2005)

To succeed in this funding proposal, EWH would have to convince the UK government that their software could be saleable to commercial, as well as non-profit, organizations and thus potentially generate a profit. This would involve a

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investments estimated to be worth around £1·5 billion. The UK remains one of the biggest exporters to Kenya, with a 10% share of the market.

fundamental redesign of the software: to suit potential paying customers. Again, the variable positioning of EWH in applying to a donor was evident, with the work of the firm presented as compatible with the donor's interests. The second option that was considered as a means to overcome the feared lack of funds involved reapplying to UKD in partnership with other firms, as part of a larger consortium. Again, positioning was key. An existing consortium organization, which had already received a large amount of funding from UKD, was identified and EWH began contacting member organizations to discuss the possibility of joining.

"(John): The thing is now to concentrate on (the consortium)… this should divert where we are going, from where we were going." (Field notes, 17th February 2005)

In summary, during the period of research, EWH's position shifted a number of times: from that of a small, standalone technology organization potentially operating in Eastern Europe, to supporting development projects in Kenya, and finally to being part of a large consortium of firms. The organization periodically manoeuvred its position and strategy in order to fit with what it hoped various powerful interest groups wanted and expected. It is important to note that each of these decisions had the potential to, and frequently did, fundamentally affect the direction and nature of the work that the organization carried out. The story of funding processes between April 2004 and April 2005 represents the story of EWH's dependency upon donor funding, and the effects of this dependency (Knights and Morgan, 1991).

"We Don't Feel Constrained"- Standing Apart at EWH

This clear dependency was by no means evident in the ways in which my colleagues at EWH spoke about, or wrote about, their engagement with development sector donor organizations. In fact, my colleagues were very aware of the contradictions inherent to the sector and frequently appeared to position themselves, and EWH, as apart from development and its problems. Maintaining this distance was key.

My colleagues' awareness of problematic aspects of the development sector in which they were employed led to a sense of cynicism about it. For example, the idea that funding can frequently be tied to particular vested interests was expressed regularly. CEO Derek remarked that:

"These (donor) organizations must be under pressure from governments to give more money to certain countries to certain types of projects: to certain things that help them to raise money in the future… *(Goes on to discuss a number of European and US government-backed development projects that target African countries for what he perceived to be self-serving reasons).*" (Derek, Interview, 30th April 2004)

Having received a large donation from UKD, Derek commented on the politics behind this donation:

"Obviously the aim of UKD is to help Britain. It doesn't say that but it must be… Looking at it in a very cold way, I mean it must be. What else is it there for? Is it purely there so that everyone could feel better about themselves? I doubt it." (Derek, Interview, 30th April 2004)

Awareness that funding frequently comes from particular vested interests was espoused by Sally:

"There are a lot of negative and very sinister aspects of development, because, well, development is largely funded by massive government organizations. I am just saying that that is one aspect of it… It's a cynical point of view but it *is still* true..." (Sally, Interview, July 2004)

Informed by his experiences within the development sector, it became clear that CTO Roger's questioning of this industry had lead to a questioning of the efficacy of the large organizations that his chairman was attempting to court.

"I mean, the more time we spend here (in Kenya), I am beginning to realize that this whole ICT for development thing… Any development that's happening is coming from local entrepreneurs that are taking advantage of the latest technologies in their

own ways. The NGO thing is starting to seem, well almost irrelevant." (Field notes, 7th November 2004)

In short, members of EWH tended to espouse cynicism about the sources of funding that they received.

Just as cynicism was prevalent within EWH, independence from particular interests appeared central. This was evident in the ways in which EWH described itself on its website and in its business plan, both of which used words like impartial, neutral and independent to describe the organization. In addition, a view of EWH as being independent underscored the ways in which my colleagues referred to the organization and its place in international development. For example, Roger's cynicism regarding the "whole NGO thing", described above, led him to espouse a view of EWH of standing apart from the sector. He resented the notion of EWH, a small and young firm, being "beholden" to larger organizations, whether these were donor organizations, or powerful partners in the NGO sphere:

"(Roger): I don't think we should be beholden to anybody… not to UKD… we aren't. And we shouldn't be, like if Red Cross tell us to… what was it? Help them with their Internet Speedometer?

(Me) Well, that could be a useful tool for EWH…

(Roger) Yes but if that's the case, we will decide to develop it and we will develop it our way." (Field notes, 7th November 2004)

Even as Dan expressed the cynicism he felt about the vested interests that fund development activities, he commented:

"Of course its unsustainable, and of course we are only going to be given as much as that interest group thinks it can afford to give away to peace and human conscience, to appear to be a good organization or government… (However) all we can do is make

the best use of those resources as we can… without compromising core principles." (Dan, Interview, 26th April 2005)

For Dan, therefore, EWH would use the donations of "interest groups" but avoid compromising its goals in doing so. This maintenance of independence appeared central to his negotiation of his position at EWH, an organization in a sector where independence was threatened continually by the nature of the funding environment. For Dan, it was vital that his organization could remain, more or less, neutral. Having expounded on the wide gulf between the moral imperative at EWH and that of some of its donors, he continued that:

"I think it's a good thing we can get money from the government, I think it's a good thing we get money from businesses… As long as we are not seen to be supporting in some way the bad things that those businesses and organizations are undoubtedly doing… I think it's good." (Dan, Interview, 26th April 2005)

He explained how, if EWH managed to do good things as a result of taking this money, then the acceptance of donations from people who do "bad things" will have been justified:

"If we can… radically change the accessibility of communication then all the money that's been invested in that will have been a fantastic thing …it will be great that we have got that money from these strange, strange sources." (Dan, Interview, 26th April 2005)

In short, taking money from these "strange, strange sources" is a distasteful necessity as EWH pursues its goals. It is seen as a temporary act and one that does not in any way change or colour those goals.

Interestingly, the ongoing enactment of this "standing apart" from vested interests in development, was necessarily social in nature. Independence appeared to be constructed through formal discussion and informal chat: through everyday talk at EWH. Even I found the notion compelling, and found myself engaging with it in

conversation. For example, early in the research period, I was involved in discussing development with two colleagues, Roger and Sally.

"In the evening, Sally, Roger and I were laughing in a self conscious manner at our attempts to 'learn' the development language... 'What *is* advocacy anyway?'…etc." (Field notes, June 2004)

Discussing, or rather mocking, the buzzwords that tended to be used in development accounts and reports, Roger began to wonder whether EWH as an organization, might take hold of these words, and reformulate them in the way it used them:

"Discussion of adjusting our language: being able to incorporate development 'ideals' into our ways of thinking (Roger and I). We are doing this in a fully reflexive, self aware way: looking at the PowerPoint slide, reading what 'advocacy' and 'rights based development' stand for… and reflecting on how it fits with... (our) value systems, what is practical for us to hope to do… (For me) …how it fits with what I think about ICT and development." (Field notes, June 2004)

This notion of standing apart was a compelling one, and it took place in the interaction between colleagues of whom, in this case, I was one. Similarly, having mocked development terminology as illustrated above, and expressed his deeply held reservations about the effectiveness of development in the longer term, Roger described EWH's independence from this sector as something belonging to the whole organization:

"I think… I hope what we bring to this is a sense of scepticism… We've come from commercial and other backgrounds but we have come into this development sector… We now have a kind of scepticism about how development works." (Roger, Interview, 20th April 2004)

Again, it is implied that a healthy scepticism, along with a background in a different sector, will enable the organization to escape from the contradictions within development. Speaking on behalf of all his colleagues, Roger perceived EWH to be a development sector organization that was sceptical of development. It was, for

Roger, this very ability to be both within *and* without "development" that would enable his team's successful negotiation around the contradictions perceived within.

"We don't *feel* constrained by… what we *think* are maybe the traditional models of how NGOs and how other institutions work… We have certainly felt at liberty to court commerce, even large commerce." (Roger, Interview, 20th April 2004)

In short, it appears that a perception of autonomy, of being able to successfully stand apart from development, was central to the negotiation of the paradoxes and contradictions that inevitably arose in day-to-day life at EWH (Butler, 1998; Fleming and Sewell; Knights and Willmott, 1999). Moreover, this autonomy was premised on an awareness of aspects of development that were problematic, and a cynicism towards these, both of which emerged in everyday talk between my colleagues.

A PECULIAR IDEA: DISCUSSING AUTONOMY

The above description of the way that the discourse of autonomy underscores life at EWH implies the depth and efficacy of this discourse. Even as a researcher, I laboured and suffered under the notion of myself as autonomous and in control of the research process. This fantasy was shattered again and again by my actual experiences within the organization. Moreover, my own confusion about my sense of self versus my experiences of being embedded in an organization reflects observations that an over-emphasis on autonomy is central to the very language Western societies use to speak about aspects of the self (Lutz, 1988; Roberts, 2005; Shotter, 1989; Willmott, 2005). These ideas are well summed up in the following excerpt, where Clifford Geertz attempts to describe what the Western conception of the person looks like to somebody coming from another culture:

"The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement and action… is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures." (Geertz, 1979, quoted in Sampson, 1989)

Sampson's history of the hegemony of autonomy within languages of self-understanding, from classical to advanced capitalism, provides a useful illustration of this point, as does Rose's valuable linkage of the language of autonomy in contemporary views of the self, with the ways of knowing promoted by dominant economic and political interests (Rose, 1999).

At EWH, Autonomy helped people to resolve their engagement with the admittedly problematic discourse of development, and large commerce, and it enabled them to perceive EWH as a separate organization, more or less in control of the environment. The efficacy of the discourse of autonomy is thus clear; it underscored a number of different and important aspects of life at EWH. In particular, autonomy had effects at EWH, where it was seen to help my colleagues ignore aspects of their own practices which acted to reinforce aspects of development about which they were themselves critical.

A further important observation surrounds the hidden nature of this discourse. Unlike, say, development or funding, autonomy was never openly discussed, either for the purpose of embracing or rejecting it. In fact, Roger and Dan equated autonomy with neutrality in the way in which they discussed it. Both men drew on autonomy as though it were an apolitical space, which enabled the "standing apart" of EWH from powerful interests, a place in which power does not exist. In short, the true power of the discourse of autonomy appears to be its ability to render itself invisible, a point made by Harre (1989) in relation to the inscription of language by notions of individualism (see also Shotter, 1989). These insights represent a contribution to a current debate within organization studies about the pervasiveness of "the self-understanding of modern subjects as 'autonomous' agents" in contemporary workplaces (Willmott, 2005: 755). In particular, the operation of autonomy at EWH answers recent calls to investigate how the "world of work and organization" contributes to reinforcing this historically contingent and problematic way of perceiving self and other (Willmott, 2005: 755). It must be noted, moreover, that in

the context of the present study, the "hidden" nature of autonomy refers to the fact that it was not easily accessible from the data gathered. In particular, interview transcripts and analyses of emails and documents showed little evidence of the operation of this discourse. Rather, autonomy was observable in day-to-day life at EWH, underlining the value of a longitudinal, ethnographic approach to the study of workplace identifications.

At EWH, autonomy was discursively constructed between people, which implies its inescapable sociality; a paradox that highlights the contradiction at the heart of autonomy (Harre, 1989). This reflects Butler's observation that even the most individualistic ways of knowing are, inescapably, given to us by the others upon whom we depend, the "personal rights" of the civil libertarian position, for example, can only be defended by, and exercised through, social means (Butler, 2004: 100). The odd thing is, therefore, that we depend upon others for the possession of autonomy: "what is one's own is always from the start dependent on upon what is not one's own, the social conditions by which autonomy is, strangely, dispossessed and undone" (Butler, 2004: 100). The qualities of Du Gay and Salaman's enterprise culture, including "self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals", do not appear particularly congruent with this approach (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 628). The question remains whether the aesthetic can win out in a workplace climate that currently celebrates enterprise.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The dangers of the discourse of autonomy were outlined in the introduction to this paper. Specifically, Butler's work on the implications of discourses of autonomy for openness and for inclusion, are useful in the context of this research, given its focus on a non-profit NGO, which espouses the aim of helping others. Butler's *politics of identification*, which she develops in collaboration with other political theorists involves a future in which an awareness of the other is taken as a starting point for a less violent means of living (Butler et al., 2000; Butler, 2004). She does not plan to

achieve this by aiming for an emancipatory state in which exclusions do not occur, feeling that such a situation is finally impossible and moreover, dangerous (Foucault, 1991b). Instead, Butler argues that instead of reifying our position on the social, we must: "stay at the edge of what we know, to put our own epistemological certainties into question and through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and of living in the world, to expand our capacity to imagine the human." (Butler, 2004: 228). For Butler then, to imagine the human is firstly, to acknowledge our inescapable dependency on others (Butler, 2004). In developing this politics of identification, she notes that contemporary discourses of the self act to obstruct such an awareness and acknowledgement; she views dominant modes of thinking about the self and identity as containing within them the potential for the exclusion of others, and indeed, for self-abasement (1993). The problem is that the illusion of autonomy compels us to ignore or remain unaware of our inescapable dependency on others, and to expect others to behave likewise. Through this illusion, we can subject others to the kinds of "tacit cruelties" that result from this aspect of our ongoing maintenance of a coherent identity, "cruelties that include self-cruelty as well, the abasement through which coherence is fictively produced and sustained" (Butler, 1993: 115). This intersubjective dependence reflects concerns within organization studies that the aesthetic, sensory and felt aspects of organizational life are increasingly lost or silenced, in particular those aspects that reflect our inescapable dependency on others (Taylor and Hansen, 2005). If autonomy appears to dominate in an account of a non-profit development organization, in which concern for the other might be presumed to be more prevalent than in, for example, the kinds of large, instrumental for-profit organizations that were described earlier, then the outlook for a renewed appreciation of aesthetic connection to others appears somewhat bleak (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Indeed, this account of autonomy in a UK work organization must be read with the caveat that, as noted by Roberts (2005), I approached this research and writing with an inescapably naturalized sense of my own individuality, of my self as "autonomous and coherent" and a sense of the "distinctness of self from other" (2005: 627). Moreover, I enjoy this sense, it gives me a compelling feeling of being in control (Shotter, 1989). However, as I experienced during my participant observation at EWH, I simply am not (Harre 1989; Shotter 1989).

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